8 sciatica stretches for pain relief

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Sciatica results from the irritation or compression of the sciatic nerve, which runs from the lower back to the toes. Certain stretches and exercises may help relieve the pain and discomfort it causes.

People with sciatica often experience pain that runs through the buttocks and down the back of the leg. The cause — which can be an injury to the pelvis or hip or direct pressure on the sciatic nerve — may determine where the pain originates.

The pain can be mild or so severe that a person may have trouble standing, sitting, or even sleeping. A range of treatments is available for sciatica, including stretches that may help ease the pain.

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Overview

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The sciatic nerve is a nerve that originates in the lower back on either side of the spine. It runs through the buttocks and into the hips before branching down each leg.

This nerve is the longest in the body and provides sensation to the outer leg and foot.

Sciatica itself is not an injury or disease. Instead, it is a possible symptom of any number of problems that may cause nerve pain running through the buttocks, down the back of the leg, and into the ankle or foot.

Some people who have sciatica describe the pain as shooting, sharp, or burning. They may experience weakness in the affected leg, and the pain may worsen with sudden movements, such as coughing.

Stretches for pain relief

Certain stretches may provide some relief for people experiencing sciatica-related pain.

Anecdotally, most people with sciatica do find that stretching helps relieve pain. However, anyone with this symptom should speak with a doctor before doing any stretching exercises to avoid further injury.

A doctor or physical therapist may recommend that people perform several of these stretches each day:

- knees to chest
- cobra or modified cobra
- seated hip stretch
- standing hamstring stretch
- seated spinal twist
- knee to opposite shoulder

- reclining pigeon pose
- groin and long adductor muscle stretch

The following simple exercises can help provide pain relief by decreasing muscle tension, decreasing compression on the sciatic nerve, addressing core stability, and improving a person's posture.

A person should do each exercise within a range that is pain-free and stop immediately if they experience any pain.

If possible, a person can perform each exercise 3 to 10 times.

1. Knees to chest

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This exercise helps promote spinal flexion and alleviate compressed tissue over the sciatic nerve. A person can do this exercise with both knees or just one knee at a time.

1. Lie flat on the back with the knees bent and the soles of the feet on the floor.
2. Slowly hug the knees into the chest by raising both knees simultaneously or one knee at a time.
3. Hold for about 5 seconds before releasing the stretch and repeating on the other side, if necessary.

2. Cobra or modified cobra

Gif by Dima Bazak

The cobra pose works on spinal extension. Extending the spine may help alleviate pain caused by a herniated disk.

1. Lying on the stomach, extend the legs straight back together and bend the elbows, placing the palms on the floor by the chest.
2. To carry out a full cobra, fully straighten the elbows, lifting the chest as far as possible off the floor. Hold for 30 seconds at the top and return to the starting position.
3. To perform a modified cobra, push through the palms and partially straighten the elbows to lift the chest off the floor to about 45 degrees.

3. Seated hip stretch

The seated hip stretch is an example of a piriformis stretch. When the piriformis muscle becomes irritated, it can place pressure on the sciatic

nerve. The sciatic nerve is closely associated with the piriformis, and it travels from the spine through the piriformis to power the legs.

Gif by Active Body. Creative Mind.

1. Sit in a chair with the feet on the floor and the knees bent at a 90-degree angle.
2. Raise the affected leg and cross the ankle over the opposite knee.
3. Gently bend forward over the crossed leg, breathing deeply and holding for 30 seconds before releasing.

4. Standing hamstring stretch

The hamstring attaches to the ischial tuberosity, which is the bone that comes into contact with a surface area when a person is seated. It is also known as the sit bone and can affect lower back tightness and pain. Increased flexibility in the hamstring results in less lower back stress and pressure on the sciatic nerve.

Gif by Active Body. Creative Mind.

1. Start by standing tall with the feet together.
2. Lift the affected leg straight out in front and rest the heel on a ledge or table that is just below the height of the hips.
3. Keeping the knee straight but soft, bend forward at the waist, maintaining a straight spine until there is a stretch in the back of the leg. Keep the spine straight while bending forward.
4. Hold the stretch for 30 seconds before releasing.
5. Return to the starting position and then repeat the stretch on the other side.

5. Seated spinal twist

The seated spinal twist creates motion to loosen the lower back and hips.

1. Sit up tall on the floor with the legs straight out in front.
2. Bend one leg at the knee and place the foot on the floor on the outside of the opposite knee. If it feels more

Gif by Active Body. Creative Mind.

comfortable, bend the horizontal leg so that it still touches the floor.

3. Twist toward the bent knee, placing the opposite elbow on the outside of the bent knee to get a deeper stretch. Hold the position for 5 seconds.
4. Return to the starting position.
5. Repeat on the opposite side.

6. Knee to opposite shoulder

This exercise promotes spinal flexion and creates a deep stretch in the hip to help create space for the nerve to pass.

1. Lie flat on the floor with the legs extended straight out in front.
2. Bend one knee and bring that knee across the body to the opposite shoulder without lifting the hips from the floor.

Gif by Active Body. Creative Mind.

3. For the best stretch, hold this position for 30 seconds before releasing.
4. Repeat on the other side.

If any of these exercises make sciatica worse, it is essential to stop immediately. It is normal to feel a stretching sensation during these movements, but not for the pain to increase.

7. Reclining pigeon pose

This stretch can help relieve tension in the hips.

1. Lie on the back and bend the knees. Place the right ankle over the left thigh at a right angle.
2. Lock the hands behind the left thigh and pull it gently toward the body.
3. Hold the position for as long as feels comfortable and then repeat with the other leg.

Gif by Active Body. Creative Mind.

8. Groin and long adductor muscle stretch

This exercise can help stretch the groin and adductor muscles.

1. Sit on the floor with the legs spread out as wide as possible in front.
2. Place the hands on the floor in front of the body and angle the torso toward the floor.
3. Lean forward, making sure to keep the elbows on the floor. Hold for 10 to 15 seconds.

Gif by Dima Bazak

Treatment

Sciatica usually resolves in 4 to 6 weeks. In the meantime, a person can try:

- performing stretches
- applying heat packs or cold packs to relieve pain and inflammation
- taking over-the-counter nonsteroidal anti-inflammatory drugs, such as ibuprofen, to help ease the pain
- placing a small, firm cushion between the knees when sleeping on the side
- placing several firm pillows underneath the knees when sleeping on the back

Prescription medications that can treat sciatica include:

- opioid analgesics, although these come with a high risk of developing a dependence
- corticosteroids, which a person can take orally or by injection
- muscle relaxers
- anticonvulsants

In addition, massage, physical therapy, or spinal manipulation may also help. In some cases, surgery may be necessary.

Causes

Sciatica is a symptom of a problem and not the problem itself. As such, it has many potential causes.

The treatment options for sciatica will largely depend on what is causing the pain.

Some common causes of sciatica include:

- a herniated disk, which occurs when one of the rubbery cushions between the spinal bones slips out of place
- lumbar spinal stenosis, which is a narrowing of the spinal cord that puts pressure on the lumbar spine

- degenerative disk disease, which is a progressive disease that wears away the cushions in the spinal column
- pregnancy
- other injuries to the back that put excess pressure on the sciatic nerve

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Prevention

It is not always possible to prevent sciatica. However, some lifestyle modifications can significantly reduce a person's risk of experiencing sciatica again.

In general, exercising regularly and building a strong core may help prevent sciatica. Additionally, maintaining a good posture while sitting and standing may reduce a person's risk of experiencing this symptom.

When to contact a doctor

A person should contact a doctor if the sciatica pain:

- does not improve after a few weeks of trying home remedies
- worsens
- is preventing a person from performing their usual activities

Summary

Certain stretches and exercises can help to relieve the pain and discomfort caused by sciatica. Examples include the cobra stretch, seated spinal twist, and knee to opposite shoulder.

Alongside stretches, a person can take painkillers and apply heat or cold packs. This can reduce pain and help reduce inflammation.

If the symptoms to not improve within a few weeks of trying home treatment, a person should contact a doctor.

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